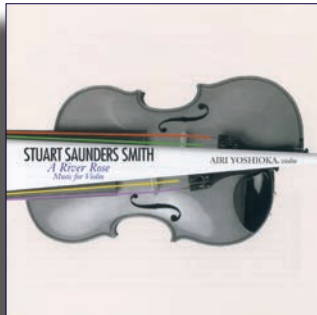




His music deserves your attention.



**S. S. SMITH** *Hearts. Three for Two*<sup>1</sup>. *A Gift for Bessie*<sup>2,3,4</sup>. *Minor. A River Rose*<sup>5</sup>. *I've Been Here Before*<sup>2</sup> • Airi Yoshioka (vn); <sup>1</sup>Maria Lambros (va); <sup>2</sup>John Nowacek (pn); <sup>3</sup>Sue Heineman (bsn); <sup>4</sup>Lee Hinkle (perc); <sup>5</sup>José Lacerda (vibr) • NEW WORLD 80754-2 (61:36)

I've encountered the music of Stuart Saunders Smith (b. 1948) periodically over the years, and I admit I had both a fuzzy and not very positive take on it. It seemed a sort of unfocused mix of Modernist and experimentalist elements, often meandering and tangled in its own complexities. That unpromising introduction is deliberately meant to set me up for a fall, and happily so. This release has reshaped my sense of his accomplishment, in all the best ways.

In this issue I've also reviewed a piece of Smith's on a program (also on New World) by the pianist Joe Kubera, and I found it strangely affecting, with a tender folkishness emerging from its webs of complexity. The sound of much of the music on this disc is similar: The default for Smith tends to be a foregrounded line of aching, highly disjunctive melody, which is constantly renewing itself, gathering steam for a new phrase even as the previous one is ending. If not solo, the accompaniment tends to be a glittering kaleidoscope of pitches in all registers, rotating around that central melody.

Smith, like Ives and Cage, is unafraid to use whatever material or technique seems necessary for his expressive purpose. Thus, in *Hearts* (2004) for solo violin, one hears almost immediately the violinist singing as well (this is a gesture that recurs in several works here). There's an immediate tension between the raw and the refined, the sophisticated and the naïve.

The concluding second movement of *I've Been Here Before* (2008) lasts only a little over a minute, and is an extremely spare unison texture for violin and piano, with both players singing and/or humming. Its previous movement has arresting silences, enhancing the work's mystery and drama, and one of the most successful uses of such I've heard.

Two works are quite early. *A Gift for Bessie* dates from 1971, and its instrumental quartet has an open feel governed (according to the notes) by principles of order and repetition left to the players' discretion. The result is free-jazzy. *Three for Two* comes one year later, and this little duet in three movements for violin and viola is wonderfully "gnarly." There's an intimate intensity in its gestures, and its avowed roots in Maine river- and land-scape make one feel it's a tone poem, but one whose program remains a mystery.

All the other works are written in the last decade-plus. *Minor* (2001) has a sweet backstory. A violinist, Rachel Koblyakov, requested a piece from Smith on hearing one of his works in concert. The only catch was that she was nine years old at the time. It's not entirely clear how soon after the composer wrote the work, but he made sure that highly mature music was the result, something the player could "grow into." In fact, the piece is rewarding in that it is grounded motivically in arpeggiated minor triads (though nothing Minimalist-sounding here), which gives it a very specific sound. Smith's trademark "endless melody" here feels more harmonically rooted and less exclusively chromatic.

And *A River Rose* (2005) for solo violin—the disc's title track—moves me the most of the entire program. Smith, like most composers of his generation, seems to have opened up some with the years, and this piece has a particular sweetness that is simultaneously never cloying. In particular, its second and third movements (of five) have a stronger tonal/consonant component than most of Smith's music, but it's very welcome, and never cheap. Likewise, the final movement has a recurrent, motivically recognizable gesture. These things are of course old hat, but somehow in the context of Smith's aesthetic and creative life-course, they feel hard won, and as such quite moving.

Attention must be paid to the impassioned, lyrical playing of Airi Yoshioka, who performs in all the works on the disc. She makes the often superhuman technical demands of Smith's writing sound natural and correct. Or said another way, she finds the true poetry in them.

I found myself thinking, somewhat sadly, that this music is the fruit of a life lived with integrity, involved a deep and sustained search for an authentic personal vision, one that's uncompromising but yearning for communication. What makes me sad is that our era is so crushed by an onslaught of undifferentiated information, and by a set of values that are solely market-driven, that such a voice has a very hard time being heard. I can only salute Smith for his perseverance, and I believe his music deserves your attention. It will give subtle but substantial satisfaction. **Robert Carl**